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Analysis: Reagan Team Shifts Gears On Nicaragua

by Deborah Tyroler

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[The article below by Roger Burbach was distributed by the Pacific News Service (PNS) during the week of Sept. 26-Oct. 2. The LADB has authorization from PNS for reproduction. Burbach directs the Center for the Study of the Americas in Berkeley, Calif., and is an instructor in Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of California, Berkeley.] By Roger Burbach House Speaker Jim Wright's recent exposure of the CIA's provocative activities in Nicaragua has been the final blow to the administration's hopes to get military aid to the contras. Virtually no one in Washington now believes any contra lethal aid will be approved before Ronald Reagan leaves office. Even before Wright's expose, the Reagan administration's foreign policy team has been quietly shifting policy on Nicaragua. In mid-September Secretary of State George Shultz instructed the contras to reopen the stalled negotiations with the Sandinistas. This marked the first time since Reagan's first term that his administration had opted to push dialogue rather than confrontation with the Sandinistas. As one high level State Department official noted, "US policy is in a transitional phase. Most of the rightwing people who once ran the show on Central America are gone. Policy is now moving in a mainstream Republican direction, with less rhetoric, more caution." The contras had broken off negotiations in June, making new demands such as direct talks with President Daniel Ortega and negotiations outside of Nicaragua. Then when the Sandinistas cracked down on internal opposition and the US Embassy for orchestrating violent confrontations, the contras and the Reagan administration demanded the release of those arrested. Now the administration and the contras are backing off from these demands. The lack of military aid makes it impossible for the contras to pursue the war against the Sandinistas. Said one Pentagon official who deals with Nicaragua, "There's no aid of any sort available right now. The contras will just be able to hold themselves together, assuming Congress passes the 'humanitarian aid' package in early October. Then the next administration can decide what to do. That's the best we can hope for." The contras themselves have been forced to see the handwriting on the wall. In early September the contras met with Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo, the conservative head of the Nicaraguan church. In no uncertain terms he told the contras the internal opposition had been "cracked" and that the contras themselves were "on their bellies." He urged them to get back to the negotiating table. The despondent contra leadership then flew to Washington where they met with Republican leaders on the Hill and State Department officials who said the issue of contra military aid was dead. Even hardline contra leader Enrique Bermudez realized the contras had no alternative but to go back to the negotiating table. The plight of the contras is in part a result of the demise of the Reagan hardliners who orchestrated the contra war. The right has never recovered from the dismissal of Oliver North, the death of CIA director William Casey, and the embarrassment of the Iran-contra scandal. Neo-conservative Elliott Abrams remains as Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, but the collapse of overt and covert US operations in support of the contras means that he has virtually no military or political cards to play against the Sandinistas. The shift in US policy also coincides with the needs of George Bush's presidential campaign. There's no secret in Washington that Bush and his campaign manager James Baker III would prefer to sweep the contra issue under the rug. In the presidential debate Bush simply ignored Michael Dukakis' jab that Bush had backed a "failed policy in Central America which is getting worse and worse." Bush did attack Dukakis for being

weak in foreign policy, but he never challenged Dukakis' position on Nicaragua. The foreign policy team being assembled by Bush is not drawn from the right wing that pushed for contra aid. James Baker would most likely hold the position of Secretary of State in that administration. As one State Department official said, "many here expect James Baker to be the new Secretary of State under Bush, and that's anathema to the right." In the early years of the Reagan administration, Baker was the most reluctant to pursue the contra war. He generally supported a two-track policy one that would try to negotiate with the Sandinistas while using the contra military option to weaken them and force them into making concessions. Bush's major policy adviser on Central America is Bill Perry, a former foreign policy adviser to moderate Republican senator Richard Lugar from Indiana. As chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations committee in the mid-80s, Lugar became the antagonist of arch conservative Sen. Jesse Helms, due to the obstructionist tactics Helms employed to push conservative causes on the committee. The right wing is criticizing the Reagan administration for going soft on the Sandinistas. And they are placing much of the blame for the shift in policy on the growing influence of George Bush's team as it tries to orchestrate administration policy to help its election campaign. Republican senator John McCain, a strong contra supporter, told a gathering of supporters that if Bush becomes president, there won't be any request for contra military aid.

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